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GLBTI police liaison services: a critical analysis of existing literature

Angela Dwyer and Matthew Ball

Abstract

GLBTI (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex) police liaison programs have been an important part of policing these communities for a number of decades now. In fact, this model appears to dominate approaches as the preferred way to manage relationships between GLBTI communities and police. Interestingly, while this model dominates, research on the effectiveness of this model, and the services that align with it, is limited. To date, only few studies have asked critical questions about the effectiveness of GLBTI police liaison services. For instance, we know that over 70% of GLBTI communities are *aware* of police liaison services, but only 4% of those victimised *access* them (Berman & Robinson, 2010). This paper critically examines existing literature about GLBTI police liaison services to demonstrate key themes and omissions. It argues that police liaison services as a preferred model has been taken for granted as the correct way of engaging with GLBTI communities in ways that may exclude other forms of engagement, and suggests that further research into these liaison programs is necessary if the relationships between GLBTI communities and the police are to be strengthened.

Introduction

Equality for sexually and gender diverse people is a goal grounded in the international human rights covenants ratified by Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011), yet such equality remains to be achieved in relation to policing. While there are many examples of greater connections being made between GLBTI communities and the police, and more awareness among the police of the unique needs and experiences of GLBTI communities, it still remains that there is inconsistent and ineffective reporting of the widespread victimisation perpetrated against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (GLBTI) people in public, private, and institutional spaces (Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 2002; Herek et al., 1997; Hillier et al., 2010; Berman & Robinson, 2010; St. Pierre & Senn, 2010). Relationships between GLBTI communities and police have improved (Tomsen, 2009), partly through the adoption of community policing methods by the police (Bartkowiak-Theron & Corbo Crehan, 2010), and the implementation of GLBTI police liaison programs across Australia. However, the increasing *awareness* among the GLBTI community that liaison services exist does not

necessarily translate to their use, with these services only infrequently *accessed* (Berman & Robinson, 2010). Thus, it is clear that there is still some way to go in improving relationships between GLBTI communities and the police, especially given that research shows people using liaison services feel better supported than those accessing mainstream police (Leonard et al., 2008).

This paper critically engages with existing literature that explores how GLBTI people report victimisation to GLBTI police liaison officers. It argues for the need to further explore how GLBTI people engage with police liaison services to investigate the gap between *awareness* and *access* of these services.¹ Knowledge of this kind is essential, we suggest, if police are to respond effectively to the needs of GLBTI communities. The paper makes this argument by first examining the literature about the ongoing issue of victimisation of GLBTI people and the continuing trend of non-reporting, and the gap in knowledge that exists specifically around young people. Discussion then moves to elaborating the dissatisfaction of GLBTI people when they do report victimisation to police and the factors that may influence this process. Following this, the paper highlights the minimal research that exists on police liaison services generally, and the lack of research elaborating specifically on GLBTI police liaison services in any part of the world. The paper concludes suggesting further research is required with GLBTI liaison officers and GLBTI communities if we are to better understand how, or even *if*, GLBTI people choose to report victimisation to police, and, if they do, how this process might best be facilitated.

The prevalence of GLBTI victimisation and its underreporting

To understand the issue of reporting victimisation among GLBTI communities, we must first consider the extent to which GLBTI communities have been victimised in public, private, and institutional spaces. While there has been some progress made in the social acceptance of GLBTI people, it still remains the case that GLBTI lives are lived in a context of discrimination, homophobia, heteronormativity. These broader social relations produce various inequalities, including forms of violent victimisation. This victimisation has been ongoing for some time (Cox, 1990, 1994; GLAD, 1994; Hunter, 1990; Sandroussi & Thompson, 1995), with research elaborating discrimination and abuse (verbal, physical, emotional, psychological, social, economic) perpetrated against GLBTI people by strangers, school peers, and family (Berrill, 1992). To summarise this research, GLBTI communities experience:

- nearly twice the level of public violence as their heterosexual counterparts (Bernhard, 2000; Dick, 2008; Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 2002; Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2001);
- violence so brutal it leads to death at higher rates than the general public (Tomsen, 2002), and;

- violence in institutional spaces, with school violence frequent and increasing (Hillier et al., 1998, 2005, 2010), and violence in workplaces persisting (Barrett, 2011; Couch et al., 2007).

In addition, GLBTI people often experience homophobic violence from family members and intimate partner violence in private spaces (at rates equivalent to heterosexual partners) (Chan, 2005; Jeffries & Ball, 2008; Turell, 2000; Farrell & Cerise, 2006; Island & Letellier, 1991; Renzetti, 1992; Vickers, 1996; Freedner et al., 2002; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000).

Levels of victimisation among GLBTI communities are consistently higher than the general Australian public (ABS, 2005a; Couch et al., 2007; Cox, 1990; Berman & Robinson, 2010; GLAD, 1994; Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2000; Leonard et al., 2008). For example, in 2005, young people in general were assaulted at rates of 9.9% (15-19 years) and 7.9% (20-24 years) (ABS, 2005b). In a study of 1749 same-sex attracted and gender-questioning young people around the same time period, 15% of them were assaulted (Hillier et al., 2005). While we will never get an equally matched comparison (because we are yet to record sexuality or gender identity in any statistics at the Australian Bureau of Statistics), these numbers highlight that same-sex attracted and gender-questioning young people appear to be assaulted more than young people in the general population. The increasing level of violence is especially concerning given reporting is decreasing among GLBTI adults. Unfortunately there is no research documenting reporting and help-seeking behaviours of GLBTI young people (Hillier et al., 1998, 2005, 2010).

The most recent Australian research reports 87% of 600 New South Wales respondents (Attorney Generals Department of NSW, 2003), 75% of 1,094 Queensland respondents (Berman & Robinson, 2010), and 57% of 339 Victorian respondents in GLBTI communities did not report victimisation (Leonard et al., 2008). These levels are higher than the general Australian population, which reports victimisation to police at rates of at least 75% (victims of break-in) (ABS, 2005a), with non-reporting rates of approximately 39% for personal crime (ABS, 2011).

It continues to be the case, though, that unique factors impact on whether or not GLBTI communities will report such violence (Vickers, 1996). First, GLBTI victims *fear the outcomes of reporting*. Specifically, they fear: police homophobia; the potential disclosure of GLBTI status; rejection from family/friends; and embarrassment about being victimised (Baird et al., 1994; Berman & Robinson, 2010; Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2001; Leonard et al., 2008; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Pattavina et al., 2007; St. Pierre & Senn, 2010). Second, they *make assumptions about the reporting process*, such as assuming that police will: minimise the seriousness of the incident; think it is a mutual fight as part of the dynamics of intimate partner violence; mistreat and further victimise them; fail to protect them; judge them as individually at fault; assess the incident as too trivial/not reportable; or suggest reporting is futile because the offender will not be located (Baird et al., 1994; Herek, Cogan

& Gillis, 2002; Lilith, 2001; Pattavina et al., 2007). While some of these factors (such as the idea that the police will fail to protect them, or the embarrassment they feel about being a victim) are shared by those that have been victimised within heterosexual communities, there are some unique factors here that are likely to be only held by GLBTI communities. Thus, victimisation experienced by GLBTI communities is an ongoing and serious concern for the just operation of criminal justice. Low levels of reporting victimisation are of particular concern when police may be a key point of referral to other victims' services (e.g. counselling). In addition, reporting victimisation is a central form of knowledge used by police in investigating GLBTI victimisation, and is vital for police if they are to work towards prevention effectively.

Counterproductive police responses

There may be a variety of factors at play in causing violent victimisation to go underreported. A wider climate of discrimination, inequality, homophobia, and heteronormativity can function to normalise violence and negative treatment in the lives of GLBTI people. If violence is understood as unremarkable, then it can reinforce a view that victimisation will not be taken seriously or addressed. The necessity to 'come out' to liaison officers during the reporting process may also contribute to underreporting (Berman & Robinson, 2010, pp. 126-127). However, a key reason why GLBTI people do not report victimisation relates to unsupportive and unhelpful police responses, which is an important dynamic to understand if interactions between police and GLBTI communities are to be strengthened. Research demonstrates unhelpful police responses include: failing to arrest perpetrators; failing to intervene to protect GLBTI people; and not considering an offence a criminal issue unless it is particularly serious (Pattavina et al., 2007). Other unhelpful responses occur when police respond to specific crimes, such as intimate partner violence. In this context, some research suggests that police make assessments about who the perpetrator is by adopting gendered (and heteronormative) assumptions in their response. In particular, they often assume that the more 'masculine', 'butch', or physically larger partner is the perpetrator, and the more 'feminine', or smaller partner is the victim (whether or not this is the case, and whether or not such dynamics even explicitly exist in the relationship), regardless of the actual facts of the matter at hand (Hassouneh and Glass, 2008, p. 322).

Importantly, research demonstrates unsupportive police responses are reported at much higher rates in GLBTI communities than the general Australian population. For example, Queensland research shows 58% of respondents who sought police assistance felt supported by them (Berman & Robinson, 2010), in contrast with 75% of the general population being satisfied with police (AIC, 2007). The historical context of GLBTI-police relations is an important factor to consider in

understanding such responses. Historically, relations between GLBTI communities and police have been strained by the criminalisation of homosexual sexual activity and the consequent discriminatory police practices attached to such legislation (Comstock, 1991). Discrimination and violence perpetrated by the police themselves have also contributed to these dynamics (Leonard et al., 2007; Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2000). While police have since worked hard to improve relationships with GLBTI communities (Tomsen, 2009), historical policing practices have left a legacy that continues to shape how GLBTI people report crime and access police support in a contemporary context (Berman & Robinson, 2010; Dalton, 2006; Willett, 2008; Cherney, 1999). Young people are reluctant to report to police (Dwyer 2011, 2009) based on their concerns about further discrimination from police, and service providers seeking to help victims are often reluctant to report to any police other than those known to GLBTI communities (Dwyer and Hotten, 2009). These issues may also be evidenced in international research suggesting that, when victimised, members of GLBTI communities are more likely to seek support from informal networks as opposed to formal ones such as the police (Farrell and Somali, 2006; Kuehnle and Sullivan, 2001; Leonard, et al., 2008; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000).

Understanding the role of GLBTI police liaisons

The high levels of victimisation, low levels of reporting, the societal contexts of inequality and discrimination facing GLBTI communities, and the historical context of policing and GLBTI communities are important dynamics to consider in understanding how to improve relationships between GLBTI communities and the police. However, it is necessary to reflect on the way that GLBTI liaison services are taken for granted as central to improving such relationships. The role of GLBTI liaison services must be explored, and the way in which such programs factor into these dynamics as well must be evaluated. However, there is very little empirical research on GLBTI police liaison services in Australia that would help in further explicating these dynamics.

We know that GLBTI police liaison programs were set up within general policing structures in the early to late 1990s as a form of support for GLBTI communities. We know they provide advice to GLBTI victims on how, or even if, to report victimisation to police (Berman & Robinson, 2010). Studies conducted on GLBTI victimisation in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria have included questions about police liaison work, but we know little else about other states and their programs. Research has documented tensions experienced by Australian “police auxiliaries” (Cherney & Chui, 2011, p. 1801; Cherney & Chui, 2010), including difficulties experienced by auxiliaries from an ethnic/racial group who had problematic historical relations with police. However, it remains to be explored whether this is an issue for GLBTI police liaison officers – an area

of particular concern given the historically problematic relationships between GLBTI communities and police noted above (Comstock, 1991).

To date, no research has gathered data from GLBTI police liaison officers, and research conducted on these services has been done *within* studies of GLBTI victimisation (Berman & Robinson, 2010; Leonard et al., 2008). For example, Leonard et al. (2008) examined how many Victorian GLBTI victims reported to police, with a minor focus on their experiences of this process. They noted 26 out of 339 respondents reported victimisation to police (with some of these outcomes notably negative), and showed that only six of these respondents accessed a Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO) to report victimisation, with 75% of these people feeling very supported by GLLOs (Leonard et al., 2008). These issues demand elaboration, particularly as participants commented on their lack of satisfaction with general police. For example, one respondent in New South Wales was told not to access GLLOs because “it would have been more involved than necessary” (Attorney General’s Department of NSW, 2003, p. 50).

The most detailed data about GLBTI police liaison services comes from Berman and Robinson (2010). In the largest ever study (n = 1094) of homophobic and transphobic victimisation in Queensland, their study provided quantitative and qualitative data from GLBTI communities about reporting victimisation to police. This research demonstrated that “the GLBTIQ community engages even less with liaison officers” (Berman & Robinson, 2010, p. 144) than mainstream police. Only 12% of the 53% victimised sought assistance from police and of these only 4% sought assistance from GLBTI police liaison officers, with most noting the officers as supportive, although some stated they felt unsupported. These figures are remarkable, considering 52% of respondents were aware of liaison officer’s availability for support. GLBTI communities expressed problems with GLBTI police liaison services, including: high turnover and lack of availability of liaison officers; unrealistically large territories allocated to liaison officers; officers willing to take on liaison role but uninterested in advancing the program; and lack of effective training. While these limitations are not unique to GLBTI liaison services, but also experienced by police liaison services more broadly, and the Queensland Police Service has taken action to ameliorate these issues (such as implementing guidelines for appropriate police conduct with transgender people), there is more we need to know.

As GLBTI liaison officer programs have not constituted the focus of research in their own right, such targeted research would allow for an exploration of many of the issues that we still need to know. These include issues related to the confidence of GLBTI people to report to police such as:

- what strategies are employed by GLBTI police liaison services nationwide to encourage GLBTI people to report;
- how GLBTI perceptions of police influence confidence to report;

- how historical police homophobia (Baird et al., 1994; Cox, 1990, 1994) influences reporting;
- the factors influencing GLBTI young peoples' reports of victimisation to police;

In addition to these issues, we need to know a lot more about GLBTI police liaison programs and the officers who put these programs into action through specific strategies and processes. Such issues might include:

- how (mis)understandings about the nature of the police liaison role influences reporting;
- how previous experiences with liaison officers inform reporting; and
- the form of police support GLBTI communities would prefer if indeed they do not prefer support in the form of a GLBTI police liaison program.

The key point is that we do not yet have data to fully understand whether or not GLBTI police liaison services provide any additional benefit above general policing services. These issues demand further research attention, as we need to ensure GLBTI victims are not “receiving reduced support and a less valuable service” (Leonard et al., 2008, p. 42) than those seeking support from mainstream police, and to increase confidence to report to police amongst GLBTI communities.

There is a further issue that must be addressed in this context, and that is the critique, levelled by minority groups, against the way that police can and do serve their interests. Reforms to the law or organisational practices such as those of the police have been critiqued because of the way that the political aims of minority groups are often subsumed into the broader goals of the law or policing organisations. The costs of doing so can be quite high, and the critical and more radical goals of these groups can be lost or distorted in the process. This is an important dynamic to consider in the context of liaison programs – such programs do not work to address the broader structural and social changes that might be required in order to fully address violent victimisation in our society. Thus, we argue that it is important to take these tensions and complexities into account when we want to understand the potential limitations of reforming liaison programs to address the needs of GLBTI communities in this context (see for example Walklate, 2011, pp. 148-150; Baird, 1997; Johnson, 2012).

Conclusion

While police and government have worked to reduce violence against GLBTI people, as exemplified in initiatives like the NSW *Working Together Strategic Framework 2007-2012*, there is clearly more we need to know about how effective this has been. We do not yet have evidence as such that GLBTI police liaison programs are achieving the goals that they were developed to achieve, or doing so effectively. As such, data that demonstrates how, or even if, these programs are considered useful/effective by GLBTI people is needed. Even more important is gathering directly the

perspectives of GLBTI police liaison officers themselves about how they experience their role as a liaison and the extent to which they think the programs are fulfilling their intended purpose. In addition to this, we have an apparent lack of information about the complex context in which GLBTI-police relations happen. For instance, we are yet to fully comprehend the role of perceptions of police amongst GLBTI people and how they influence how GLBTI people report victimisation to police. In addition, we are not aware of the extent to which historical police-GLBTI relations impacts upon these perceptions in a contemporary context – has the historical criminalisation of sodomy left a legacy of mistrust of police amongst GLBTI people in contemporary times? We also know very little about the role of unsupportive police responses to GLBTI reports of victimisation. In all, there is much work to be done to better understand relations between GLBTI police liaison programs, GLBTI people, and reports of victimisation.

Further research must therefore aim to more fully account for relevant contextual and social factors, and in particular the role of police liaison services in this landscape. These forms of knowledge will be important for further strengthening police service provision and creating stronger partnerships between GLBTI communities and police. More importantly, we need to begin to ask challenging questions about GLBTI police liaison programs in order perhaps to interrogate (and possibly disturb) the taken-for-granted assumption that liaison programs are the best way to engage with GLBTI people. This is an area that is ripe for further theorisation, given the rich body of research in similar fields regarding victimisation in various forms.

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ⁱ The authors are currently undertaking such research in Queensland and New South Wales, Australia, with Dr Christine Bond, Dr Murray Lee, and Associate Professor Thomas Crofts. The project uses quantitative and qualitative tools, and encompasses the views of GLBTI communities and GLBTI police liaison officers themselves.